Dress Code: Latvian

Photographs in this brochure have an illustrative function – the traditional garments displayed may not be of complete historical authenticity.

Cover photo:
Contemporary remake of a Rucava region folk dress made out of 9 belts, 4 trousers, 3 crocheted blankets, a jacket, shirt, sweater and a bicycle gearwheel. Recycled.lv collection Etnography, 2014.

Upper right:
Contemporary accessories with traditional Latvian graphic symbols. Each sign has its own meaning and was believed to have different protective qualities.

National dress is an integral part of Latvia's heritage. If you have ever looked at one, you must have noticed that more attention was paid to beauty than practicality. The many colourful layers, ornaments, brooches and embroideries probably did not make life easier for Latvians of the past. Yet even today, when you spot someone in such a costume, you will sense the elegance and grace radiating from both the wearer and garments.

Of course, garments that have survived up to the present are costumes worn on festive occasions. They have been handed down from generation to generation as treasured heirlooms. Nowadays, you are most likely to come across people dressed in these timeless jewels during the Nationwide Song and Dance celebration. All participants of choirs and dance ensembles are likely to wear costumes from their respective region of ancestry.

At its essence, a traditional Latvian costume was the dress worn by the indigenous inhabitants of Latvia – the Balts and Livs. It includes everything that its owner hand-made for the various seasons and occasions. In contemporary Latvia, artists and designers still draw inspiration from the countless ornaments, symbols, colour combinations and designs, the knowledge of which has been kept alive throughout the centuries. The oldest models date back to as early as the 13th century. However, in recent years all sorts of ancient designs and apparel, loved by the younger generations, have come back into fashion. This has resulted not only in a refreshing wave of patriotism among Latvian youth, but also in fascinating, new interpretations by contemporary artists.

Traditional Latvian costumes have not only survived the touch of time, but also managed to remain relevant in a society influenced by a wide orchestration of other cultures. This brochure will take you on the journey of Latvian fashion through time.

Left: Bubble-brooch *(burbuļsakta)* with stones, typical of the Kurzeme region, ca. 19th century.

Right: Maidens dressed in Kurzeme region's folk dress reproductions, ca. 19th century.

Each Dress is Like a Snowflake

Previous generations seemed to attach more importance to things than we do now. Garments worn on festive occasions lasted for several lifetimes because each generation was proud to wear the beautiful adornments, brooches, woollen shawls, patterned belts, and head-coverings inherited from its ancestors. At the same time, accessories of the respective time were added. Successive fashion trends are thus present in one set like on buildings from medieval times with Baroque and Art Nouveau elements added later on. Undoubtedly, each outfit had its own unknown history and legend. Every piece, because of its individual maker and wearer, was unique. While preserving and continuing the traditions of a region, each wearer created his or her own distinctive costume.

Of Cinderellas and Princesses

Left: A maiden works on increasing her dowry or *pūrs* in Latvian, dressed in Priekule county's folk dress, South Kurzeme, second half of the 19th century.

Right: Zemgale region's folk dresses with added layers as seasonal adjustments: great shawls and mittens. Garment combinations from multiple districts of Zemgale, ca. 19th century.

As in many a land of the past, ancient Latvian girls had to do their own share of chores. Among others, a key one was to make their own clothes. You can probably imagine how much effort was put into this, as girls wanted to look their best in search for the youngster of their dreams. Sewing, weaving, knitting and the like were all part of a young Latvian woman's agenda. You could call them real life cinderellas, as diligence was a virtue. Especially since every potential husband could tell how hard-working the girl he had laid eyes on was simply by what she wore.

Layers are "in"

The foundation of any attire is, of course, the undergarment. Layer upon layer, the complete traditional dress becomes more colourful and ornamental. The undermost layer, however, was neat white linen. By the 13th century, the main parts of a woman's outfit consisted of a skirt and a long-sleeved, tunic-shaped linen shirt, which was a unisex garment that could also be worn alone. The shirt and skirt were sewn from a plain, square fabric without any patterns.

Crown

For at least a thousand years, the head-covering served to signify the wearer's marital status. The symbolic headdress for a maiden was a wreath or crown (*vainags*). In Liv regions, a ribbon served for the same purpose. Thus, you could say that all unmarried women were princesses in their own right. It was unseemly for a married woman to go out bareheaded. On festive occasions, married women used to wear a head-cloth, a practice that continued throughout the 18th and 19th centuries. During this period, various types of women's hats were worn. For daily wear, married and unmarried women favoured homespun linen or woollen scarves. At the end of the 18th century, commercially manufactured silk scarves became a fashionable part of the national costume; they were worn on the head, over a hat, or around the shoulders. In the making of the headdress, various manufactured materials were used: glass beads, lace, and fabric.

Skirt

Before the 19th century, there is evidence of a skirt which was not sewn but which was simply a piece of fabric wrapped around the body and secured with a belt. The Livs wore skirts that extended above the waist. They consisted of two pieces of fabric – one for the front, one for the back – which were fastened at the shoulders (later, sewn together) and cinched with a woven belt. The two-piece skirt was the precursor of the skirt with a sewn upper part. Meanwhile, the wrap-around skirt developed into a sewn skirt with pleats or gathers.

Upper left: Unmarried Latvian women wore crowns to indicate their marital status.

Lower left: Patterns and colours of women's skirts could not only differ from the specific region – small deviations from the norm were acceptable to suit the taste of the wearer and to ease the process of finding an appropriate cloth.

Upper right: The most popular and iconic element of ancient Latvian design, the Lielvārde Sash.

Lower right: Wife in a warm shawl, typical to the Latgale region, ca. 11th – 12th centuries.

Sash

The basic function of the sash, or *josta*, was to secure the skirt, as well as to girdle the waist, in order to allow freedom of movement. Incidentally, only women wore patterned sashes. It is believed that the designs are related to traditions of fertility cults. In Liv regions during the 18th and 19th centuries, patterned sashes were not worn because the apron served that same function. The length of the sash varied: sashes of three meters or even more were wrapped around the waist several times.

Shawl

In all regions an essential part of the national dress was the woollen shawl, or *villaine*, a rectangular or square fabric draped around the shoulders. Possibly, as the oldest part of the costume, it served a dual purpose. Embroidered or otherwise adorned, it accented a costume worn on a festive occasion. While plain or checked – kept the wearer warm day-to-day. Summer shawls were made of linen. In the 18th and 19th centuries, festive shawls were chiefly white or sometimes blue. In earlier centuries, they were predominantly dark blue with bronze ornamentation. The function of a festive shawl was to both adorn and protect the wearer, as if isolating her from the outside world. Occasionally, multiple shawls, skirts, and head coverings were worn together, perhaps to show off the owner's prosperity.

Don’t Judge a Man by His Hat

Left: Men in festive clothing typical of Ventspils, Kurzeme region, ca. 19th century.

The men’s dress had more city fashion influences than the women’s costume. The tunic-style shirt remained unchanged, yet the homespun trousers and jacket began to reflect city fashions in the 18th century. Military uniforms also influenced the style of a Latvian man’s costume, especially in details such as lapels and embroidery. Unlike women, men usually did not make their own costumes. Instead, they often enlisted the aid of a tailor or a female relative.

Although not overtly obvious, a man’s apparel usually indicated his social status and welfare. Small yet important improvements to the standard outfits of various regions were made, also serving a decorative function on jackets. During various centuries, daggers were an integral part of a men’s costume. Jackets and trousers for daily wear were usually made of grey homespun material; white fabric was used for festive occasions, although this varied largely depending on the respective region.

A long jacket was accompanied by a belt. Woven belts were characteristic for eastern regions (Latgale), while those made of leather with metal elements were typical for western (Kurzeme) regions. Until the mid-19th century, trousers came to below the knee, and woven knee-length stockings made up the rest. Long trousers only became popular in the latter part of the century. The most popular head-dress was the broad-brimmed hat made of felt and adorned with a ribbon. A hat made of straw was preferred for the warm summer months.

Amber is the New Diamond

An abundance of jewellery on the national dress also indicated the wearer's wealth and status. Shirts and shawls were fastened with brooches. Those created between the 17th and 19th centuries reflect the influence of Renaissance and Baroque art, as well as local artistic traditions. Some examples are very delicate and of remarkable complexity. Most of the jewellery was made of silver. In Kurzeme brooches were plated with bronze. Sometimes they were adorned with red or blue stones. Amber brooches, amber beads, and double buttons, or frogs, were largely sought for, but mainly characteristic of southern regions. Brooches engraved with solar designs attest to the symbolic association between amber and the sun.

Footwear

The chief footwear for men and women were *pastalas*, a simplified form of shoes made of a single piece of leather and tied with laces. They served both for daily and festive wear. In cold weather, several pairs of stockings were worn. In earlier times, feet were ordinarily wrapped in footcloths. Festive occasions called for shoes or boots, which, of course, indicated the owner's prosperity. Men in particular were subject to evaluation by the footwear they could afford. Pitch-black, knee-high boots, usually worn by military officers or rich merchants were, to a certain extent, a subject of admiration from the opposite sex.

Upper left: Ornament showing an animal figure with a central amber piece representing the sun. Handmade reproduction by Inita Straupe.

Lower left: Typical footwear *pastalas* were suited for use throughout the year by wearing appropriate socks.

Upper right: Modern bag made to resemble a traditional mitten with historically accurate patterns.

Lower right: Different patterns and colours on mittens, as well as any other apparel, indicate the affiliation to a specific region, district and county.

Writing the Patterns

On festive occasions the dress was adorned with embroidered, woven, or knitted designs to make it visually impressive, distinctive, and unique. Geometric designs are characteristic for Latvian folk art. They usually consist of separate elements combined in a unified composition. It is possible that the intricate patterns are a form of writing, a way of communicating a concept or a wish. In the Latvian language, the same word is used to denote writing and ornamentation. The *raksts*, or a design, consists of ever-changing patterns.

A popular example of the complex Latvian pattern work is the Lielvārde Sash. Into it, weavers put a particular array of ancient power symbols, said to give strength, health, wisdom and other good traits to the wearer. Some even argue that the Lielvārde belts – each a unique work of art – hold secret messages in the form of ethnographic codes. There might be some truth to that, as according to Latvian mythology Laima, the goddess of fate, weaves each person's thread of destiny.

A Colour for Every Occasion

Colours played an important role in dress adornments. White and grey predominated because garments were made of natural fabrics, such as linen and wool. In ancient times, yarn was coloured with natural dyes, chiefly from indigenous plants. The designs on mittens, shawls, and sashes were created from combinations of four colours – red, blue, green, and yellow. These colours manifested in various shades and proportions in every part of the costume that was made of wool. Possibly, the strict observance of traditions in regard to colour was related to sorcery.

White, with its magical associations, holds a special place in Latvian folklore. The word itself, *balts* is synonymous with purity, goodness, and enlightenment. White was deemed fitting for festive garments.

Like many other European nations, Latvians use a lot of red in their national dress. Red has always been associated with fire and blood, but also with life and vitality. Red threads decorated linen and cotton garments, such as aprons, head-coverings, and shirts.

Black, which was regarded as the colour of the gentry, was not characteristic of national attire. The use of black in farmers' garments began in the second half of the 19th century, and even then only in combination with other colours in striped skirts or patterned mittens.

Upper left: Maidens in undergarments bathe and enjoy themselves in a river.

Lower left: Colourful skirt fabrics of Madona and Cēsis districts, Vidzeme region.

Upper right: A historically unlikely meeting. From the left: mixed folk dress from Lejaskurzeme, Nīca parish; archaeological Liv gown, ca. 13th century; Lielvārde district and Vidzeme region costumes – both 19th century.

Lower right: The Suiti women (*suitu sievas*) burst into song, dressed in ethnographic Alsunga county folk dresses, Kurzeme region.

No Quarrel Over Taste

Each region of Latvia developed its own distinctive traditions regarding the dress. Tied as they were to their homes and lands, farmers were acquainted only with their immediate vicinity but were ignorant of the traditions and practices of more distant villages. Everything necessary for fashioning national costumes according to regional traditions could be found at home. As long as traditions were observed, the national dress retained its distinctive designs. Home-made attire for daily wear preserved traditional features longer than festive costumes, which were more susceptible to influences of urbanization. Exceptions were some regions in Kurzeme – Nīca, Rucava, and Alsunga – where festive costumes remained unchanged until the mid-20th century, though ordinary garments were store-bought. Traditions governing national costumes are still alive in these regions.

A Return of What Never Really Left

Maiden welcomes the Summer Solstice. Folk dress from the Dagda county, Latgale region, ca. 19th century.

Nowadays the national folk dress in its traditional sense has become a valued museum piece. However, even today Latvians are eager to revive the use of national costumes as a way of affirming their national identity or adding a distinctive touch to holidays and special occasions. One such occasion is the Song and Dance Festival, where national costumes are worn not only by the singers and dancers but also by the audience. While some wear reproductions, others boast with their family heirlooms, passed on from generation to generation. Another occasion would be Midsummer celebrations or *Jāņi*, the most popular Latvian holiday, which most people spend according to ancient traditions and close to nature. The wearing of national dress creates a feeling of unity among those present and affirms a link to the past. Together with songs and dances, national costumes demonstrate Latvia's cultural heritage to the world.

Things tend to last only as long as someone needs them. Nowadays, there is still a need for national costumes. Orders for individuals and organisations are taken by artisans at studios of applied arts. Displayed as a diploma work, a handmade national costume can take years to construct as its maker masters weaving, embroidery, and other essential skills. By fashioning one's own costume, the maker becomes acquainted with his or her own history as the pattern for the garment is chosen from one's own ancestral region.

Although the traditions associated with national dress are part of history, the desire of each generation to be creative and individualistic in one's apparel is still alive today. Ancient designs and patterns of the national dress are reflected not only in professional works of art, they now appear on everyday objects and are even inspiring new, brave adaptations. These ethnographic accents help to distinguish Latvians from other nationalities and nicely add a touch of Latvianness to our modern lives.

A Latvian Sets Forth Into the World

Left: Latvians have a knack for wearing apparel with symbols or ornaments of Latvian origin in order to distinguish themselves from the crowd. Modern Lielvārde belt in Amsterdam.

Times change, globalization increases and shows no sign of abating. Two Latvian characteristics, however, remain where they have always been, even in the 21st century.

First, it's a talent for handicrafts. Latvians continue to knit, sew, embroider and use ancient techniques and ethnographic ornamentation to create something new. Things that used to be worn by one's grandmothers take on a new meaning and purpose when the creative grandchildren take them on.

Second, and here globalization can take its fair share of the blame, – Latvians have always liked to stress that they come from a small, but highly charged place by the Baltic Sea, especially when they find themselves in an international milieu. As Latvia joined the European Union, many Latvians went in search of jobs and fulfilment abroad. To feel more secure in his or her new environment, a Latvian takes the Lielvārde Sash with him – albeit in a 21st century format and with a slightly different function. Those who are happy right here in Latvia, express their identity by other modern means – by wearing elements of their national costume with everyday clothes, or, choosing the work of local designers who quote traditional elements.

Crowns for Modern Queens

How can you make a familiar song resonate differently? Brigita Stroda is a Latvian who was born in Melbourne, Australia. Her family was among those Latvians who became refugees after WWII. This generation is characterised by a strong drive to preserve Latvian traditions and to instil them in their children.

When Brigita was 14, she saw a rather spectacular wedding crown from lower Kurzeme in a *Latvju raksti* ("Latvian patterns") book, and knew immediately that one day she would make one herself. Many years were to pass before The Crown Heads of Europe series would emerge.

These are crowns that remind us of traditional Latvian ones but at the same time, they are something entirely new. Brigita's crowns are 100% hand-crafted in her apartment from a wide range of materials – antique Swedish ribbons, military decorations, vintage accessories and bits found in the boxes belonging to her aunts Tekla and Malvīne.

Brigita believes that successful art or fashion has to be genuine. Her crowns exude stories, rituals, grandeur and beauty that are indigenous. Brigita wants modern women to adorn their heads, and thanks to her crowns, it's already happening. A young Latvian woman wore one of Brigita's crowns at her wedding – just like Latvian girls did a hundred years before her.

Left: Ancient crowns worn by Latvian maidens have a certain aura of majesty about them. This has served as an inspiration for modern women's accessories.

Wear the Warmth of Home

Ancient Latvians would wear cuffs or *mauči* knitted from fine wool and beads around their wrists. They were a decorative embellishment and a sign of prosperity, but also served the purpose of warming the pulse.

Rotaa continue this modern version of a Latvian tradition. A morning star, a double-headed grain stalk, fragments of the Lielvārde Sash can all be found on braided bracelets that look as if they have been woven on a loom. Just like *mauči*, the Rotaa bracelets are made to be worn by men and women alike. With their rich shades of grey and a magnetic clasp, they even connect with patriotically inclined young men. Many of these bracelets make their way abroad – as an accessory that portrays who you are, "over there".

Right: Even though the traditional bracelet has gone through a transformation into an element of modern design, its symbolic meaning as bearer of good luck and protection remains.

Wrap up, Get Cozy

The *Cita Rota* scarves are also something that Latvians take with them, moving abroad. Made from merino wool, of course they will warm a Latvian in the coldest of winds, but more importantly, the scarf will always remind the wearer of their roots in Latvia.

The scarf is created using the Lielvārde Sash pattern with ancient coded signs of protection, well-being, health and success. This warm accessory serves both men and women and they are available not only in the traditional red and white colours but also in grey-white, black-white and other colours.

Considering that Latvians also live in places where the warmth of a scarf is not required, *Cita Rota* uses silver, traditionally much favoured by Latvians, to recreate an ancient seven-sign neckpiece. A silver chain carries pendants bearing the sign of Laima, Ūsiņš, Māra's cross and other significant symbols for Latvians. Since ancient times, Latvians believe these symbols protect the family, bear the wearer good luck on a journey, bring fertility and protect the wearer from evil spirits.

Left: The patterns of the Lielvārde Sash carried over into scarves, a recent fashion trend. The Lielvāde pattern offers its wearer welfare, luck, protection and health.

Upper right: The Classic Skull T-shirt collection by Tru Fix Kru features several traditional Latvian ornaments.

Lower right: An element on Tru Fix Kru's T-shirt features a the Lielvārde Sash pattern.

Tradition Picks up Pace

It may seem that investigating your roots is something that befits those who are devoid of the opportunity to live in their homeland or those who live in little towns or the countryside where the pace of life is slower and the local museum more active. Oh, how wrong you are!

In the heart of Riga, the nation's capital, there's a company called Tru Fix Kru. It belongs to a bunch of young guys with a passionate fixation for fixies (fixed gear bikes). They promote the bicycle as an alternative everyday mode of transport.

The energy of ancient Latvian symbols is already present in the company's logo. It consists of a skull with a sun for one of the eyes and a *Jumis* on the chin. The guys regularly create new collections, like an ascetic, completely white shirt with a Lielvārde Sash pattern on the pocket. The same pattern is used for womens' leggings which are produced in collaboration with another Latvian brand, QooQoo. In honour of Lāčplēsis' Day, two special T-shirts were created, devoted to the hero of the Latvian national epos, Lāčplēsis, and the woman of his heart, Laimdota. Lāčplēsis wears his traditional hat with bear's ears and has an *Auseklītis* on his chin. Laimdota looks like a traditional Latvian maiden with a braid and the splendid *Bārta* crown on her head.

A Latvian Prepares for Festivities

The biggest celebrations for Latvians used to be weddings and funerals. Nothing has changed, but there are additions. Birthdays, names' days, christenings and graduations. In any case, dressing up is a must.

And this is where WOWOWO comes to the party! Initially the company had thought of braces with Lielvārde Sash patterns in lilac, light green and grey. However, if you are going to do something, you may as well make the whole set, and so, the braces were joined by a bow-tie, tie and handkerchief. The demand was so great that the company also produced skirts for women in the same coloured Lielvārde Sash print.

WOWOWO products are also popular among Latvians as corporate gifts – after all, a practical thing like a tie is always useful in a male household. In fact, the delegation hosts during Latvia's EU Council Presidency will be easily recognizable in the company's bow-ties and scarves in the Presidency colours.

Left: Orange and violet graphic pencil skirt, bowtie and tie – all with coloured variations of the Lielvārde Sash pattern. Handmade, the WOWOWO collection, 2014.

Right: The Lielvārde Sash is reborn in contemporary Latvia to serve its ancient function – as a belt.

The Second-Cousin of the Lielvārde Sash

The vitality of the Lielvārde Sash is indeed powerful. It's no wonder that its patterns appear on almost every second designer product, it's only the designer's approach that is different.

In ancient times, the Lielvārde Sash was worn by men and women alike and was wrapped around the waist several times. Ethnography academics still cannot agree on whether the patterns arranged on the sash can truly protect you from bad luck or they were simply ingenious forerunners of contemporary design.

Seeing in how many versions and variations the sash appears today, it's clear that the truth is somewhere in the middle. Still, there is only one company – *Biksēm* – offering a product which has retained the sash's original function – to hold up pants. The Lielvārde Belt for men is manufactured from modern materials with a metal buckle. The Lielvārde Belt is another signature sign by which Latvians recognize each other abroad.

A Matter of Light

In bygone times when there was no electricity, Latvian families would gather around candles to read, sew household linen for the trousseau. Fire is power, as it can cook a meal, but it can also bring disaster if left unattended. Fire gives light, at the same time, it embodies darkness, for sooner or later all the candles will go out.

Today, even though every home has electricity, Latvians are keen enjoyers of candles. Light a candle and remember the heroes killed in battle. Light a candle and remember those family members who have passed away. Light candles on the Christmas tree and spend the longest and darkest night together with your family in eager wait for spring.

The Latvian Lights brand grew out of the Latvian designer Baiba Linga-Bērziņa's BA Thesis at the Art Academy of Latvia in 2008. The first products were four candles in the shapes of ancient Latvian signs – the Sun, the Moon, the Thunder and *Ūsiņš*. In time, other shapes were added to the series.

The candles are made in bright contemporary colours and compliment any interior – be it a country house or a modern city apartment. At times they fit in so well that the owners don't even want to light them.

Left: Candles can retain both their primary function and still be unique design elements for your interior.

Right: And who said note-making has to be dull? Traditional patterns and colours can lighten up your personal note-making and perhaps even help form some creative ideas.

Pattern Follows Pattern

And here is another thing to bear in mind about Latvians - they are usually thrifty. There's a simple explanation – the climate is unpredictable, as the political situation throughout centuries. Latvians tend to say, "You never know," as they fold away the offcuts from sewing the skirts of a national dress, you know, for needy times.

The designer stationery brand *Purpurs* adds some respect to notepaper and imbues this practical thing with dignity by adding national costume designs. Binding them in fabric usually used for skirts, the notepads are further proof that Latvians are good at adapting and finding ever more uses for familiar things. Now we just have to figure out what we can write in such a beautifully bound notebook!

Put on Your Lucky Shirt!

Left: Shirt featuring a traditional mitten design. The bottom line represents the earth, entwining all "living" colours and the sky. In it, five new lives are "written". Since the human soul comes from the sky, the upper ornaments of the Sun and Māra symbolize birth.

When a Latvian is successful, another Latvian says: "Yeah, well, you were born in a lucky shirt." Biologically it means one thing, but poetically it has an entirely different meaning.

Inspired by an interest in Latvian crafts and traditions, a well-known Latvian musician and singer Linda Leen has created her own brand of clothes and shoes for modern Latvians who want to cling to their roots, but prefer to do it discreetly.

Her *Etnografizēts* collection consists of T-shirts and dresses that are decorated with Latvian patterns. Each symbol contains its own energy and the goal of the collection is not only to reveal their aesthetic beauty but also to explain their meaning and allow each wearer to tune in to the power within on a daily basis.

Linda believes that our thoughts have great power, therefore, if the wearer is aware of the meaning of the pattern, its power is doubled, hence the motto of the collection – Put on Your Lucky Shirt! The collection was devised in collaboration with Valdis Celms, a semiotics expert and author of the Latvian Patterns and Symbols book. He advised on the use of various signs.

For a full effect, Linda also created footwear, raising simple peasant sandals, *pastalas*, usually seen at The Song and Dance festival or in the book illustrations of Latvian folk tales, to new heights. Why not give them expressive colours and wear them more often as a casual fashion accessory?

The idea came to Linda one summer she spent wearing *pastalas*. She concluded that they are ideal for city dwellers that move around on bicycles and scooters and walk small distances.

The *pastalas* collection called *Pastala* by Linda Leen is not only a comfortable, but also an unusual and bright addition to your wardrobe. For clever owners, their life span extends beyond a Latvian summer – they are ideal for the home, as changeable footwear for the office or for a trip to a sunny location.

Those who have wholeheartedly embraced the *pastalas* admit that wearing them gives you interesting and unusual sensations – it's as if you are walking on the city asphalt barefoot as the leather is very thin. At the same time, there is a powerful feeling of stability underfoot. After all, those ancient Latvians knew very well that you wouldn't get very far on high heels.

It's Just the Beginning

Right: This "Hipster folk dress" is an artist's interpretation of a traditional costume. It is not a reproduction, nor does it represent a specific region. Yet it bears striking resemblance to our forefathers' apparel. Made out of 16 belts, 4 pairs of jeans, 3 linen shirts, a jacket, sweater and bicycle gear. Recycled.lv collection Etnography, 2014.

The ancient Latvians made their folk dress from linen and wool, and their jewellery from silver, bronze and amber. In the 21st century, Anna Aizsilniece by making folk costumes from recycled items, by embracing the emotions, moods and spirit of the time.

The Recycled.lv brand received its initial fame amongst Latvian design fans with its skirts made from men's shirts. They were voluminous, heavy and substantial. Just like the women's skirts of the ancient Latvians. Then she turned a new page in the history of Latvian folk costume by creating an ambitious collection called *Etnogrāfija* that was shown during Riga Fashion Week.

These are 15 garments that visually allude to a folk costume, but formally they are something quite unexpected. The collection uses 64 pairs of men' s pants, 60 belts, 37 shirts, 16 jackets, 14 scarves, 10 jumpers, 4 crocheted doilies, 3 coats, 2 dresses, 2 ties, 2000 santims, 1000 resistors, 80 bulbs, 64 keys, 20 bicycle gear wheels and ball bearings, 4 transformers, 4 chandeliers and a handful of nuts and bolts.

It sounds like the contents of an attic in a Latvian country house where you keep things that one day might come in handy. And look how handy they turned out to be!

If you look at things from a different point of view, you will notice ten more meanings. Anna is very good at this, take for example – santims. Latvian coins before the Euro was introduced, santims, are perfect as decoration on the dark blue shawl of the Alsunga folk costume. The Rucava crown makes good use of a belt, which has been altered by a steam iron. And, with the best of intentions, a gear wheel can serve as a traditional brooch from Bārta. Anna walked around in her self-made costumes all summer and felt like an authentic Latvian folk-maiden.

Climb out of your pre-conceptions and stereotypes – this is just another way to feel the Latvian spirit. The metamorphosis of Latvian folk dress has just begun!

All in all, it is fair to say that traditional Latvian costumes have never left the scene, and most possibly – they never will. As long as the Latvian spirit and way of life are alive, so will the costumes live on, be they exact reproductions or contemporary variations. Whatever the change might be, it is ultimately the wearer that adds the seal of „traditional Latvianness" to a costume.

As legendary Latvian poet Rainis once said,
„*Pastāvēs, kas pārvērtīsies.*" – Only what changes will last.

The Latvian Institute promotes positive awareness about Latvia abroad, creating a competitive identity for the state. The Institute works closely with local and foreign dignitaries, diplomats, academics, students and international media in developing an understanding of Latvia, its people and branding.

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The Latvian Institute

For further information please contact
the Latvian Embassy or Consulate in your
country, or the Latvian Institute:
Pils iela 21, Rīga, LV 1050, Latvia.
Phone: (+371) 6750-3663, Fax: (+371) 6750-3669
info@li.lv, www.latvia.eu
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